

Year A Proper 16, 27 August 2017  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA  
"Who Am I?"

My life, like all of our lives, has cycles and seasons. The kids are all groaning because they are on the cusp of their new school year. The parents are all relieved that things can get back to "NORMAL," if there is such a thing. We break our lives up into manageable segments, linking them together like some great train stretching back into the past. And we add cars one onto the rest with each passing season. We break up our lives into these manageable sections to help gain scale and scope. In the course of a lifetime, this makes sense. We add a sense of narrative to all the individual occurrences.

Too often, though, we do the same with our daily lives, breaking the areas of our lives into compartments like a cafeteria tray, thinking that we can keep the entree portion from touching the vegetable which avoids the bread that cannot stand being near the milk. We apportion our lives into these bits, thinking we cannot handle everything if they merge and blend. We have our work life, and our family life, and our friendships, and our faith community, and our hobbies. Each with their own parameters and expectations and problems.

As we separate ourselves into these compartments, we do ourselves a disservice. We think we are making things easier, but we really are not. We need to be our whole selves all the time. As hard as that sounds, and yes, it does even to me, I think that this is what the Apostle Paul was going at in Romans 12. We need to live our whole lives as our whole selves, and we need to bring this de-compartmentalized self to God. This God in whom we live and move and have our being.

Listen again to the beginning of his chapter. (Romans 12:1-2)

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

For me these verses so much encapsulate the call of Christ when he talked about having that abundant life in John 10:10.

Paul here is talking about voluntarily sacrificing our bodies to God as living sacrifices. Now this is a strong a powerful metaphor he was describing to the church in Rome when he was writing to them. They lived in Rome. They knew about sacrifices. They knew about the burning of flesh and the slitting of throats. They had seen it, and probably had participated in it at one point in their lives. Paul knew what he was doing. And it still resonates through the ages. We still use terms like sacrifice in a metaphorical sense instead of literal, but the power of what he is saying is still there. Paul takes this image, and moves it to the next level. For us to present our bodies, our whole selves, nothing holding back, we must bring it all to the table. **We cannot hold anything back.**

Think of someone showing up to join the army, but only bringing two arms and a torso. “I am presenting myself, but I am leaving my legs behind because I do not plan to run.” I am sure a drill sergeant would love to respond to that.

If it is absurd in that situation, why do we do it in our spiritual lives? Why do we hold anything back? Paul urges the Romans to present their whole selves and give it up to God, the good, the bad, the ugly. When you sell your house, you do not get to keep your stuff in storage in the closets and garage. The new owner will want to move in, make upgrades, and make it their own. God is the same way. When we give ourselves over to God and God’s rule in our lives, God gets to sweep out those dark closets where we keep our secrets hidden, and shine the light of love and grace and clean them out. It was true for the Romans and it can be true for us, even in our fast-paced compartmentalized lives.

Our work is given over to God. Our family life is given over to God. Our media feed. Our thoughts. Our worries. Our successes. Our failures. Our wants. Our hopes. Our visions. Our prayers. Nothing is held back if we truly give it over to God.

My favorite translation of these two verses comes from a unique version of the Bible, Eugene Peterson did a translation called *The Message*. I cannot compliment it enough. Some translations do a word for word translation, looking at translating each word or at most each phrase from the Hebrew or Greek. The New American Standard or the New Revised Standard versions take this approach. In foreign cultures, though, the metaphors or ideas do not ring true. Translators have to do a thought translation, attempting to translate the intent and forget about the words. Peterson figured enough of our culture was unchurched and post-Christian enough that he would try that. And so, here is his translation of Romans 12:1-2:

*Romans 12<sup>1-2</sup> So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (The Message translation)*

Peterson really does get to the gist of the matter, doesn’t he? I think his rambling run-on thought actually matches the feel of Paul in the Greek pretty accurately, as well.

How do we give our whole selves over to God? In the traditional: *be transformed by the renewing of your minds*. In *The Message*: *fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.*

The best way to give back to God as a thank you for what God has done for you is to be the BEST YOU YOU CAN BE. God does not want sacrifices that make a pleasant aroma, although most love the smell of a good barbecue. God wants you to be who God made you to be. It may be the noble (and easier) route to die for something, but God is calling us to live for something, for God.

When asked about what I want for my daughters, I want them to be healthy and happy. I want them to be their best selves. There are a lot of things that they can do, but there is only one thing that they can be, themselves. And, they find and live out their best selves in who God made them to be. That is what I want for them. And God wants the same for me. And God wants the same for you. We transform our minds, our way of thinking and being, so that we can respond and react in a Godly way. We need to have the Bible such a part of us that we do not have to ask the old question: What Would Jesus Do? WWJD? We do not have to ask it if it is already a part of us.

The glories of the Book of Common Prayer is that there are wonderful riches to discover or keep with you if you pay attention. Proper 28 has a wonderful Collect:

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ...*

That is what I am talking about, as we grow in Christ and follow him in our Christian walk, it stops being something we do and it begins to become who we are.

In the movie *The Karate Kid*, the main character, Daniel, is being trained by Mr. Miyagi, the super for his apartment complex, in karate. Mr. Miyagi takes him to his home and has him paint the fence. Paint the fence up. Paint the fence down. The next day he has him wax his collection of cars. Wax on. Wax off. Wax on. Wax off. The next day he paints the sides of his house. Paint the house [left]. Paint the house [right]. Paint the house. Paint the house. The next day he sands the deck. Sand the floor. Sand the floor. Sand the floor. Sand the floor. At the end of the fourth day Daniel loses it because he slaved away for four days, and did not learn a bit of karate. What Mr. Miyagi was doing was putting the basics into his muscle memory, and then they were able to put it all together. Paint the fence, paint the fence. Wax on, wax off. Sand the floor, sand the floor. And once he had given over his body fully to his Master, his Master was able to transform him by the renewing of his mind. What began as Wax On, Wax Off, became karate. Instead of looking at the compartmentalized actions, when he stepped back and put it all together and it became karate. In the Christian life, what might begin as the Ten Commandments and Thou Shalt Not, can become our ability to “discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect.” And that is the point of this, isn’t it?

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” It was a most important question for them. They came back with what others were saying. But Jesus came back with what did they, the disciples, say. It was a most important question for them. It is a most important question for us. How we answer it, not with our mouths, but with our lives, is what we are getting at today. Who do you tell the world who Jesus is, by what you say and by what you do? Is going to church something you do? Or do you come here because of who you are, or who God is transforming you to be?

This week the country was obsessed with Totality. On the 21st, if you were in Richmond, you saw what 85.6% of an eclipse was. It was powerful and impressive. But the footage showed, and all my friends who made the trip said, that Totality made all the difference. This distracted and divided

country came together for about 2 ½ minutes at a time, and shared a sense of wonder and awe. Imagine what the world would say if they saw someone give themselves 100%, Totally, to Christ.

In closing, beloved saints of God, I have one more question for all of us. Who do I say that I am? We ask it of ourselves. Who am I? Why am I here? Just like Admiral Stockdale, if you remember him. We can search our whole lives, and never find the answer to that. But, may I make a suggestion. If we want to know who we are, we might want to begin with the one who made us, loves us, and wants us to succeed.

We could even make it a prayer. “Lord, who do you say that I am?” And as we grow in Christ, God cannot wait to show you!

The one who began this good work in you, will be faithful to complete it. *Amen.*